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# ARE PUBLIC LIBRARIES PUBLIC BLESSINGS?

BY JAMES M. HUBBARD.

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IT IS NOW scarcely forty years since the foundation of the first library owned by the people at large and intended for their use. Up to that time libraries had been either the property of shareholders or supported by subscriptions, or they were connected with societies and educational institutions, or, as in the case of the Astor Library, they were meant solely for students. This, however, was designed primarily to bring within the reach of the clerk, the mechanic, the laborer, all the treasures of literature. The experiment was so immediately successful that it was quickly tried in other places, and now public libraries are to be found in every part of the country.

It would surely be difficult to find, the world over, a more attractive picture, or one which represents in a material form more fully the height to which our civilization has reached, than one of those village greens on which stand side by side the church, the school, the library—that complete triad of the moral and intellectual forces of our age. Especially attractive is it when the library building is, as is not seldom the case, the town's chief architectural ornament, the memorial of some grateful son or honored citizen. Then, with an interior as winning as its exterior is beautiful, with the atmosphere of quiet and repose which the presence and companionship of books almost necessarily bring, even to the rudest, it is difficult to overestimate the refining and elevating influences which it may exert on the natures of many of those to whom its doors are freely opened.

In one respect the library enjoys a peculiar distinction as compared not only with the other two, but with all public institutions, so far as my knowledge goes. The church is more or less closely connected with the body of which it is a member, and consequently has no perfect freedom of action. The school is under the direct supervision of the State. The governing body of

the library alone is practically, in many cases absolutely, independent. In some instances, the town appropriates certain funds for the maintenance of a library and appoints the trustees and, occasionally, the librarian ; and here its power rests. In others, the trustees are a self-appointed, self-continuing body, the citizens having no voice in their selection. They may not even hold the purse, since there may be a permanent fund for the support of a library. In this case the trustees are irresponsible, there being no supreme authority, save public opinion, to whom they must render an account of the manner in which they exercise their powers, or to call them to account for a neglect of their duties.

The question naturally suggests itself in view of this fact, Is there any good and sufficient reason for this independence of control on the part of the directors of public libraries? And further, Are there any real or possible dangers resulting from it, against which it would be well to guard? In order to determine whether there is anything in the nature of their duties to justify the irresponsible position of these public officials, it is necessary to state briefly the object for which the public library is established. This is : to promote the education and elevation of the people, or, in other words, to make of it a People's High-School. That was the idea of the original founders. They had visions of young men and women whose circumstances had thrown them upon the world to seek a living in the store, the counting-house, the factory, and at the sewing-machine, with just education enough to awaken a thirst for knowledge ; and they determined that they would give them the means of satisfying this thirst. Who could tell, they thought, how many Arkwrights, Stephenson, Lawrences, or Lincolns there might be among these humble mechanics and clerks, whose powers would be lost to the world if knowledge of books were denied them?

Not only this, but the library was to be the means of rescuing them from the dangers of the street, the saloon, the low amusements of the poor; to lift them above the sordid surroundings of their daily life. It is somewhat curious, considered in the light of after developments, that the Boston Public Library, and with it the whole public-library movement, owed its origin largely to the dread of the dangers of excessive novel-reading by the young. Joshua Bates, the London banker, whose munificent gifts made that institution a possibility, wrote that he did this in order to

“save those who, left to themselves, [would] waste their time in railroad literature, chiefly American novels. These publications are doing immense mischief.”

The instruction, then, of the people was to be originally, and still ought to be, the chief object of the public library. And, it should be said in passing, in many places trustees, librarians, and school-teachers, especially, are earnestly striving to realize all that its various founders and benefactors have hoped from it. But to the education of the people it has from the first added the task of furnishing them with entertainment, and, at the same time, it threw open its doors to children. Naturally, they alone have availed themselves to the utmost of the privileges offered them, and naturally, too, they read almost exclusively the novels and story-books provided for them. Soon all other uses of the library were insignificant compared with this. From 70 to 80 per cent., and in some instances practically the whole, of the books circulated were fiction, read chiefly by the children. Notwithstanding the strenuous efforts for some years past of many having the charge of libraries in different places to counteract this tendency, it still remains the fact that about three-quarters of their circulation is of this character. That is, the libraries are in no true sense of the words educators of the people. They are the haunt, in every place, of a few scholars and persons of leisure, but their chief work is to furnish amusement for the young.

This fact alone, to my mind, very greatly diminishes the attractiveness of the picture, to which I have referred, of the beautiful building filled with the treasures of literature and thronged with eager readers. So far as the children are concerned, I am confident that, even if the novels at their command were the very best in the language, they would be far better off without them, and if dependent alone upon what their homes could afford for such recreation. But there are other facts which, when fairly and honestly considered, must make many seriously doubt whether the public libraries, as at present generally administered, are not a grave evil to the communities in which they are placed.

Forty years ago, many persons in New England and in the States settled by New-Englanders had a strong prejudice against all novel-reading, many holding it to be a downright sin. Others, more enlightened, did not go so far as this, but objected decidedly to the reading of novels by children. Still

others, again, permitted their children to read novels, but were very careful in their selection and strict in their prohibitions. "Jane Eyre," I distinctly remember, was a prohibited book in my youth, and Bulwer was a forbidden author, as were all French writers. But the standard of selection of books for the public libraries, if originally high, soon fell so low in many as to admit all novels above the very lowest grade. Where the funds were plentiful, as in the larger cities, practically everything above a dime-novel was purchased. The natural result of this indiscriminate buying was that tens, nay hundreds, of books which the best critics had pronounced profoundly immoral in their tendency and teaching found their way into the hands of children. If protests were made,—and in some places they were continually made,—the ready answer on the part of trustees or librarians was that it was a people's library, and that what the public asked for should be supplied. Others urged that it was necessary to have books even of a poor character in order to attract readers who would read nothing else, and who, once brought from the dance-hall or the street-corner to frequent the library, would be educated up from the reading of the most sensational novel to the enjoyment of Scott and Shakespeare. It seems almost silly to refute this argument, and yet, urged as it was by some well-known writers, it probably still retains its specious force. For there is an element of truth in it which renders it fascinating to certain philanthropic, but illogical, persons.

To make this theory effective, the strictest control over the reading is absolutely necessary. The dime-novel, the sensational story, must be succeeded by one of a slightly higher grade, and if this process be rigidly carried out, possibly now and then a street-boy, if he possess exceptional abilities, may be brought to an intelligent appreciation of the classics of romance. But to imagine that this same result could be produced by giving such a lad the free range of a great collection of novels, good, bad, and indifferent, is simply the mark of ignorance of human nature. Not one in a hundred, under these circumstances, unaided and unrestrained, would go from the bad to the better and gradually thence to the highest walks of literature. And these persons wholly lost sight of the fact that, in attempting to rescue one street-boy by this means, they exposed a hundred other children to the danger of forming a taste for the lowest class of novels.

These, then, are the facts. Not only have the public libraries, as a whole, failed to reach their proper aim of giving the means of education to the people,—not necessarily, it should be said, through any fault of their guardians,—but they have gone aside from their true path to furnish amusement merely, and that in part of a pernicious character, chiefly to the young.

A few years ago this evil was far greater than it apparently is at present. Then so numerous were the works of notoriously immoral authors in our larger public libraries that many parents would no more permit their children to frequent them than they would allow them to go to a low theatre or a variety show. Public opinion at length became aroused, and there was a general reform. Many of these objectionable works were removed from the shelves of libraries in every part of the country. But doubtless the force of this outburst of public opinion has now spent itself, and this purifying work needs to be done over again. For one cannot take up a library catalogue without finding in it a score or more of books which no child should read.

The whole of the danger which a public library may be to the community to which it belongs has not yet been fully revealed. In some of the city libraries, and possibly in some of the town libraries,—but of this I have no certain knowledge,—there is a department, technically known by some as “*The Inferno*,” in which books of unquestioned and undisguised immorality are kept. They are, I hasten to say, not all, probably only a very small proportion of them, of the “*Decameron*” type—immoral books, but still classics in spite of their character and for other reasons. They are to-day, more frequently, books noteworthy simply because of their wickedness, not because of any literary or historical merit—books just exactly as worthy of being preserved as pictures which are remarkable merely on account of their gross obscenity. The numbers of these books which are being produced mainly in Europe, both original works and the republications of works produced in a more depraved age, would probably astonish many of my readers. They are published chiefly, no doubt, to satisfy the prurient tastes of individuals; but the fact that libraries are also constant and certain purchasers must be an important factor in leading to their publication. Many a trustee, it can hardly be questioned, who would not dream of buying such books for his private library, and would shudder with horror if he saw them in

the hands of his daughters, purchases them for the public library under his charge without a qualm of conscience. And there they lie, a mass of corruption, having, probably in all cases, a very limited circulation ; but still, one can be assured, they are not bought to be locked up from every eye—needing, like low-fever germs, but light and air to break into a moral pestilence.

From the existence of these two evils, the circulation of books among young people of a character especially injurious to them, and the gathering of collections of openly-immoral works,—evils for which there is, so far as I am aware, no direct remedy in the hands of the public,—I assert that the trustees of our public libraries should be held responsible to some more definite tribunal than that of public opinion. I might have mentioned other possible dangers, such as the power of the directors of any library to make it a propaganda of any delusive *ism* or doctrine subversive of morality, society, or government ; but I prefer to rest my case here.

The next inquiry is whether there is any way of controlling the enormous power exercised by a few irresponsible persons in moulding the characters and forming the habits of thought of a large and the most promising part of the youth of our land.

The true remedy for the first of these evils is, of course, to give up entirely the circulation of all novels among children. I am conscious, however, that the public is not yet ready for this heroic remedy, though I have not the slightest hesitation in affirming that it will come to it in time; not because of the dangers connected with this practice, but because of its expense. When the public sees clearly that it would actually be cheaper for a public library to *give away* fifty copies of a story like Stevenson's "Treasure Island," for instance, published in newspaper form, than to buy *one* copy in book form and circulate it twenty-five times, then it will peremptorily demand the cessation of this costly process of furnishing free entertainment of a doubtful character to the young. Failing this desirable reform, I would suggest the passing of a general act by our State legislatures making it a penal offence, punishable by fine or imprisonment, for any persons connected with a public library to loan to a minor any book of an immoral character after they shall have received official notice from the proper authority that it is immoral. And I should add to the act this further provision, that no book of an openly-immoral character should be permitted to leave the library building.

The intent of this provision, of course, would be to limit the reading of such books to proper persons.

But the most important question is, Who shall constitute this "proper authority"? It is evident that it must be a body whose decisions, being final and without appeal, shall commend themselves to the people as intelligent and impartial. It cannot be a mere local board, for except in the larger towns and cities it would be difficult to find persons qualified to exercise this authority wisely. In some places there are "examining committees" of leading citizens appointed by the trustees to investigate into the workings of the library, to point out evils, and to suggest reforms, but many years' experience has proved that these committees, however well-meaning and intelligent, cannot be relied upon to do a reforming work. In some instances their reports have simply served to hide the evils which it was their duty to expose.

It is not necessary to create any new board of State censors of public libraries, for there is already existing in all our States, if I am not mistaken, a body of officials impliedly well qualified for the task. I mean the Board of Education. Here are a number of citizens of high standing whose official work is entirely in connection with the education of the young, who ought to be the best judges of what books would be injurious to the immature mind, and whose judgments would command the entire respect and confidence of the community. To them should be referred any book which a parent or teacher regarded as harmful, and if on their examination it proved, in their judgment, to be unfit for the reading of young people, their notification of this fact to the different public libraries of the State should cause its immediate withdrawal from circulation. In addition, it should be required of every public library to send to the Board of Education a list of all works of notorious and undisguised immorality which it contained, and thereafter annually to send a list of all such works purchased within the year, together with their cost and the number of times which they were consulted. It will be evident, I think, that this provision would tend greatly to check these purchases, which, from the very nature of the case, are now made secretly, the fact that such books are in the library not being made evident in the public catalogues. The Board, having before it an exact statement, would know the extent of the evil and its dangerous possibilities to any special community, and would doubtless



find means, if necessary, to put an end to it altogether in individual cases. Trustees naturally would hesitate any longer to spend comparatively large sums—for these books are invariably very costly—for the productions of these literary *cloacæ*, if they had to make an official report of the fact to the State authorities.

I am sanguine enough to believe that these measures, or measures similar to them, if adopted, would have an influence which would reach farther than the public libraries themselves. In them, I am confident, it would be powerful for good. Purchasing committees and agents would be far more careful in their selection of books for these institutions, if they knew that their choice in doubtful cases would possibly be subjected to official scrutiny and censure, and with every year there would, in all probability, be less and less occasion for the Board to exercise its functions as censor. But beyond and above this, I believe that literature itself would be influenced by the action of this Board. Now there is no authority to pronounce a book immoral in its tendency and teaching, unless it is of so gross a character as to come within the reach of the law against obscene publications; and of these I have not been treating. Accordingly an author may offend glaringly against the public morals and not suffer for it, except in the adverse criticisms of the press, which simply help the sale of the book. But let a novel be officially pronounced unfit for circulation in the public libraries of a dozen States by the Boards of Education of those States, and the thing would wear an entirely different aspect both to author and publisher. Simply from the point of view of the latter, the cutting-off of this important purchaser, the public library, would be a very serious consideration. But the reproach of an official branding, as it were, of one's work would, I am convinced, deter many a young and foolish author from seeking popularity by such dangerous and degrading means. To take but a single instance: had such a power as I propose rested in our various Boards of Education, I do not believe that "The Quick or the Dead?" would ever have been written. But it is to the public library that the greatest gain would come. The official recognition of it as an integral and important part of the general system of education would tend to raise it to the very highest plane of usefulness.

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